The Earliest Leonians

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Do you ever wonder how some of Leonia's streets got their names? Although many are named after trees, most commemorate Leonia's founding fathers. Among the early Dutch settlers were the Vreelands and the Van Ordens. Land for the first church in Leonia, the "True Dutch Reformed", was donated by Thomas Moore. The first mayor was Cornelius Christie. C.D. Schor was our first storekeeper, railroad station agent and postmaster. Mr. Paulin was the real estate man who developed the Leonia Heights part of town (the southeast hill). Reldyes Street was named after the secretary to the Leonia Heights Land Company (Seydler spelled backwards). And Leonia's livery stable was owned by Mott Allaire, Leonia's first, and only, cowboy. His horses were used to pull Leonia's first hook and ladder and were also rented to the movie producers in Fort Lee during the filming of early westerns.One of the highest streets in Leonia, towering over the Hackensack Valley, is Oratam Terrace, named after Leonia's oldest and perhaps noblest inhabitant, Chief Oratam. Oratam was the leader of the Lenni Lenape Indians in Northern New Jersey at the time the European settlers arrived in the 1600's. He was a contemporary of Tammany, the great Lenape leader who negotiated with William Penn in Philadelphia. William Penn thought the Lenape Indians were one of the lost tribes of Israel and treated them with the greatest respect.The earliest European settlers in the Leonia vicinity arrived some twenty years after the Pilgrims first celebrated Thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock. At that time, there were about 1,000 Lenape Indians living in a village just north of the Glenpointe Hotel. The Lenape were peaceful, friendly Indians who spent their lives farming, fishing and hunting. Each tribe had its own hunting and fishing grounds. The foundation of the Lenape government was liberty and the early settlers found them very friendly and fair.In the spring the Lenape Indians planted their crops; in the summer they paddled down to Staten Island to collect shells for wampum beads (Indian money); in the fall they held "kinte-koy" festivals which included taking steam baths in huts along the river. In the winter, they retreated to a "fort" in Palisades Park, for protection from fierce Seneca Indians.The Lenape men shaved their heads and faces with sharpened mussel shells, leaving only a scalplock at the top. The women wore their hair pulled back and kept it shiny with bear grease. The Indians used fish oil to moisturize their skin; repelled mosquitos with eagle fat; and applied raccoon grease as a sunscreen.Their hunting ground was one of the finest hardwood forests in the world--present day Leonia--a lush forest full of bear, deer, wolves and mountain lions. Indian squaws and their children frequently foraged through Leonia's forest in search of berries, roots and other edible plants. Mothers carried babies on their backs in papooses lined with soft green moss, the ultimate recyclable diaper. Hunters often brought home orphaned baby animals--bears, fawns and crows--as tribal pets for their children.When a young Indian boy turned 13, he went on a "Youth Vision Quest," spending several nights and days alone in the primeval forest of Leonia to find his helpful animal spirit. When a young girl turned thirteen, she generally got married.Chief Oratam lived during an important transitional time in the history of the Lenape. When he became Peace Chief, his main function was to keep peace among rival Indians. When the Dutch and English arrived in the mid-i 600's, he became the primary treaty negotiator between the settlers and various Indian tribes.The Lenni Lenape did not have a written language, using instead sticks and symbols. Sarah Kierstede, the wife of a local Dutch surgeon, trusted and respected her Indian neighbors and learned their language. She offered her services as translator to Chief Oratam and accompanied him on his frequent visits to New York City during treaty negotiations. To show his gratitude to her, Oratam granted her 2,260 acres of land in the area of Leonia and Palisades Park.For the most part, the two groups got along well. But Chief Oratam was faced with problems similar to those of modern-day communities. Some of the less scrupulous settlers brought cases of brandy "fire water" into the Indian villages, selling it in exchange for land and wampum. This greatly angered Chief Oratam, who was a prohibitionist. And with reason.The Indians who drank the brandy quickly discovered it put them into the same trancelike state they sought naturally to communicate with their God, "the Great Mystery." It seemed logical to them that the more they drank and the faster they drank it, the more fulfilling their communion with their God would be.Not surprisingly, their heavy and frequent consumption led to brawls with settlers and other tribesmen, neglect of tribal chores and ultimately addiction. The self-discipline on which the Indians prided themselves in the face of starvation, torture and accidents crumbled with the introduction of liquor.With the assistance of Mrs. Kierstede, Chief Oratam got the Dutch leaders to pass and enforce one of the first anti-substance abuse laws in America. Oratam was empowered to "seize the brandy brought into Indian country for sale and those selling it." Offenders and their families could have been sent back to Europe.The laws weren't tough enough, however, to save the Indians from the onslaught of settlers. Chief Oratam lived long enough--90 years--to see most of the Indian lands in Northern New Jersey sold or given away. He witnessed "violence on the streets" as his own warriors quarreled amongst each other after heavy consumption of spirits. He also watched helplessly as more than half of his people died from diseases to which they had no immunity--measles, smallpox and cholera.Chief Oratam's name lives on in hotels, athletic clubs, paintings and street signs. Many of the problems he dealt with 300 years ago are still with us today.It's interesting to note that Leonia has had no taverns since becoming a borough in 1894. The town fathers drew the boundaries to exclude the rowdy tavern at the top of Fort Lee Road, thus explaining the notch in the map.Most of the descendants of the "original Leonians" now live on reservations in Kansas and Oklahoma.